



# Antagonism and austerity: The December 2012 Romanian parliamentary elections

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## ARTICLE INFO

### Article history:

Received 27 January 2013

Accepted 30 September 2013

For nearly a decade prior to the December 2012 parliamentary elections, Romanian politics was afflicted by partisan animosities and looming stalemate. Apart from the legislative seats won by ethnic minorities, parliamentary representation was divided among three major political parties – the Social Democrats (PSD) to the left, and the Liberals (PNL) and Democrats (PDL) to the right. Effective governance usually required alliance of two of these parties against the third. A right-right alliance of Democrats and Liberals and a left-right alliance of Social Democrats and Democrats previously had collapsed with bitter re-creations. In 2012, a new left-right alliance, of Social Democrats and Liberals, formed largely in opposition to outspoken and controversial Democratic President Traian Basescu, and it swept to victory. The so-called Social Liberal Union in December 2012 won approximately 60% of the vote and more than two-thirds of the parliamentary seats. The question now is whether the alliance will prove stable and capable of governing. This brief paper first will review the conditions leading up to the 2012 Romanian parliamentary elections and then will analyze the results.

### 1. Prelude to the election

To many, the 2004 Romanian elections heralded the end of post-communist transition (Stan, 2005; Downs and Miller, 2006). The communist-successor regime that had dominated Romanian politics in most years since the revolution was defeated, replaced by a Truth-and-Justice Alliance promising overdue reform and modernization. Democrat Traian Basescu was elected president, and Liberal Calin Tariceanu was named Prime Minister. Conflicting personalities, disagreements over constitutional duties, and the dual executive arrangement of Romania's semi-presidential institutional system soon led to disputes and dissolution (Marian and King, 2011). By April 2007, Prime Minister Tariceanu was heading a minority government purged of all Basescu supporters from the Democratic

Party. This was quickly followed by a parliamentary attempt to impeach President Basescu, which failed dramatically in a national referendum.

The 2008 Romanian parliamentary elections confirmed the existence of three-party stalemate (Downs, 2009). A coalition of Democrats and Social Democrats succeeded in naming Emil Boc, a Basescu ally, as Prime Minister, but the coalition predictably soon collapsed as the 2009 presidential contest approached. After Basescu's narrow re-election (Muntean et al., 2010), there was a period of uncertainty regarding the formation of a new government. Ultimately, Emil Boc was restored as Prime Minister with support from his PDL, all the ethnic minority parties, and some independent MPs who preferred to be on the winning side.

Yet fate was not kind to the Boc government. The world financial crisis hit the fragile Romanian economy severely. In 2009, GDP fell by 6.6%, domestic demand fell by 13.5%, and official unemployment rose to 6.9%. The contracting economy put stress on the government budget; the public sector deficit was 9.0% of GDP in 2009, compared to 2.9% in 2007. Romania remained solvent due only to special assistance worth EUR 12.95 billion from the International Monetary Fund (Stoiciu, 2012).

In May 2010, Prime Minister Boc canceled a trip to Michigan State University, where he was to receive an honorary degree, for emergency meetings with unhappy representatives of the IMF. The outcome was an unanticipated and quite severe program of austerity and structural reform. Salaries for public employees were cut by 25%, pension and support benefits were cut by 15%, and VAT was increased by five points up to 24%, among the highest in Europe. In addition, government employment was reduced, a new labor code eased terminations and reduced the power of unions, and certain government utilities were scheduled for privatization. Not surprisingly, the austerity program was enormously unpopular, with criticisms fueled by the opposition political parties and their affiliated television stations and newspapers. By July 2010, 72% of Romanians said that they did not trust President Basescu; only 10.7% remained in favor of the government of Prime Minister Boc. PDL popularity never recovered yet Boc remained in power until January 2012, when confronted by street

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demonstrations over proposed health care reform. It was more convenient for the opposition parties to blame and condemn than to assume responsibility for the implementation of disliked but generally necessary policies.

Finally, in April 2012, with elections approaching, a new left–right coalition formed and assumed power. Under the aegis of the Social Liberal Union (USL), Social Democratic Party leader Victor Ponta became Prime Minister and National Liberal Party leader Crin Antonescu was named prospective candidate for President. The coalition was tested in the Romanian local elections of June and it proved relatively secure and successful, winning more than half the votes cast. This provided the inspiration for what some commentators termed an attempted “mini-coup”.

On June 20, former Social Democratic Prime Minister Adrian Nastase shot and minimally wounded himself in an alleged suicide attempt after being sentenced to prison on corruption charges. The same day, the international publication, *Nature*, accused Social Democratic Prime Minister Ponta of having plagiarized large portions of his doctoral dissertation. The government press office dismissed the charges as “unsubstantiated”, responding that they “have a very transparent political tinge” (Schiermeier, 2012). This claim was sustained by the Romanian National Ethics Council, whose members had all been removed earlier in June and replaced by those appointed by the Ponta government.

On June 28, President Basescu and Prime Minister Ponta feuded over who should represent Romania at a meeting of the European Council. The Constitutional Court favored the former while Parliament defended the latter. Soon afterward, the USL leadership announced plans to suspend President Basescu, with hopes of impeaching him from office on grounds of alleged constitutional violations. The USL removed the Ombudsman and replaced him with a person from the Social Democratic ranks. It replaced the heads of the Chamber of Deputies and the Senate so that Antonescu became interim President and would assume the office permanently if Basescu were impeached. The Ponta government also attacked the Constitutional Court for political bias and moved to limit its powers regarding actions internal to the Parliament. These moves sparked a wave of international condemnation. U.S. Ambassador to Romania, Mark Gitenstein, was outspoken with concern over the independence of democratic institutions; President of the European Commission, Jose Manuel Barroso, expressed worry over unprecedented attacks on the rule of law.

As required by the Constitution, removal of President Basescu depended on a national referendum, held on July 29. Of those voting, more than 87% favored removal, with approximately 46% turnout. Basescu had urged his supporters to boycott the balloting because, according to Constitutional Court interpretation, a valid referendum required turnout by a majority of eligible voters. Further debate ensued over the actual number of eligible voters and the rights of Romanians residing abroad. Finally, on August 21, Parliament formally invalidated the referendum and restored Basescu to office. All attention then turned to the forthcoming December parliamentary elections.

The main task for the Social Liberal Union (USL) was to maintain unity among its component parties. A special

meeting of the leadership in September apportioned candidates among the Social Democrats, Liberals, and other members of the alliance, so that no two were running for the same parliamentary seat. The main task for the Democrats was to shed itself of negative name recognition. It joined with the minor Peasant Party and the Civic Force and was re-christened the Right Romania Alliance (ARD). Apart from the Hungarian Union (UDMR) and other ethnic minority organizations, the only other relevant contender for seats was the People’s Party – Dan Diaconescu (PP-DD). Diaconescu, a media mogul with his own private television station, established the party in 2011 based on vague expressions of protest, an eclectic combination of policy proposals, and considerable personal egotism.

The electoral campaign itself was somewhat tame, certainly when compared to the political turmoil of the previous years. Individual accusations predominated. Few social or economic issues were debated and no detailed plans for governance were presented. It was a foregone conclusion that the USL would win handily. The real question was whether its margin would be so large as to force President Basescu, despite his denunciations, to keep Victor Ponta as Prime Minister, and if so, whether the two could learn to work together in Romania’s dual executive system of institutions.

## 2. Electoral rules and results

The 2012 Romanian Parliamentary elections resulted in a decisive victory for the Social Liberal Union (USL). This left–right coalition of Social Democrats and Liberals, along with the small Conservative Party, obtained more than two-thirds of legislative seats. As expected, the great loser was the Right Romania Alliance (ARD), comprised overwhelmingly by the Democratic Party of President Basescu, that saw its support decline by half compared to 2008. The amorphous People’s Party of media personality Dan Diaconescu (PP-DD) received almost as many votes as the ARD. The Hungarian ethnic party (UDMR) again obtained enough votes to qualify for parliamentary representation, and eighteen other small national minorities were granted special reserved mandates in the Chamber of Deputies (King and Marian, 2012). Calculated turnout was 41.76%, about two and a half percentage points higher than in 2008, the first year that Romanian parliamentary elections were held separately from presidential elections. Nevertheless, the figure is not necessarily reliable; the denominator is suspect as Romania experienced considerable out-migration particularly after its accession to the European Union in 2007.

Election outcomes are produced from two separate components, the expressed vote preferences of individuals and the rules by which those preferences are aggregated and transformed into legislative seats. Romanian rules regarding vote aggregation are especially complex, with multiple stages and methods of seat allocation (Marian and King, 2010). First, at the local level, the 43 electoral constituencies in Romania (41 counties + the city of Bucharest + the Romanian diaspora abroad) are subdivided into electoral colleges of approximately equal population (315 for the Chamber of Deputies and 137 for the Senate). The total valid vote within each constituency is summed and

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